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ABSTRACT

A description is given of the organization and operation of a network of persons who work together tc accomplish the following six educational goals: (1) diagnose problems that impair student performance in the basic skills and other areas; (2) link schools with the best available educational programs to meet their needs; (3) link schools with people who can provide expert assistance; (4) help schools locate financial resources required to implement solutions; (5) build the capacity of the school to solve problems; and (6) assist schools to develop inservice programs tailored to their needs. (JD)

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THE FLORIDA LINKAGE SYSTEM

Bridging the Research-to-Practice Gap: A Response to Educational Accountability

Paper Presented at
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by
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In recent months, the implementation of the Florida Educational Accountability legislation has drawn nationwide attention and much criticism. The focus of controversy is centered primarily on the mandate that graduation from high school is contingent on the successful completion of a functional literacy test.

The 1977 assessment of eleventh grade students in Florida schools has confirmed what was anticipated and feared; many of these students do not meet the minimum performance standards set by the state, and too many students have not mastered the functional literacy skills regarded as essential for coping in our present world. And the public rightfully asks how this could happen in view of the billions of dollars spent by the federal government over the past 13 years alone, for research and development in education, and for programs under the Elementary and Secondary Education legislation.

Why have educational research and development and the additional financial support provided by the federal government not created the changes required for an "essential" education? Among the many reasons, one seems of overriding importance; that is the traditional preoccupation with the means, i.e., the how of education rather than the results of the efforts. As described by Roger Kaufman*, on the educational policy level this means in many instances that "the educational system has been made accountable for hours in the classroom, for numbers of learners in each classroom, for the books to be used, for educators degrees and hours of training and for a host of

*Roger Kaufman, The Prince and the Faceless, Nameless Child, AV Communication Review, Volume 25, No. 4, Winter, 1977.

processes having little or nothing to do with that which education has accomplished each June at graduation, and promotion time". And according to Kaufman, in response, educators have traditionally proclaimed that these policies limit the processes they perceive as critical -"open classrooms and schools, individualized instruction smaller classes, differentiating staffing, community participation, love, caring, creativity, and motherhood."

Such preoccupation with educational processes is appropriate only after desired educational outcomes have been determined. Florida has made its first attempt in identifying the skills which may be considered essential for functioning as a "literate" person in the present societal context. In addition, the state has established milestone performance standards at four grade levels which are considered only a minimum for promotion. Provisions are made in Florida law for revision and refinement of these standards, with assistance from educators and the public, to meet the changing minimal basic skills needs of Florida students.

The 1977 results of the statewide assessment have clearly identified the need for improvement of Florida's educational program. They have also created an opportunity for a commitment at every level in Florida's educational system to do something about this need, most importantly at the school level, where education takes place. As pointed out by Emrick and Peterson in their analysis of the findings of five recent studies of educational dissemination and change:

> "A very complex picture of schools and how they interact with external human information and resources emerges from these five studies. First, they are not active, but reactive. Schools operate as loosely coupled social bureaucracies. As such, their modus operandi is "status quo" unless <u>externally imposed incentives and resources impinge on them</u>. They are not striving, 'success-oriented', continually improving, self-organizing systems. In a sense, schools present an

> enigma - they are almost totally beyond control, either external or internal, at the basic operational level of instruction. Hence, they are exceedingly difficult to change toward specific ends, particularly from the outside."*

To school staffs, Emrick and Peterson report "Change requires work, involves risks, and seldom offers clear immediate advantages." (p.8)

The Florida accountability legislation has certainly provided Florida schools with "externally imposed incentives". It has heightened the responsibility of schools themselves to meet the identified needs of its students. However, for schools to assume this new role and to become more efficient and effective in achieving educational improvement, all Florida agencies have to coordinate their efforts and resources to become a viable support system. Hence, non-threatening working relationships have to be established which will link teachers and principals to other educators, to best practices, and to current research findings which bear on the particular problems faced by schools.

The Florida Department of Education has recognized the need for such working relationships and linkages. More than three years ago, the Department in cooperation with representatives from the Florida public and all education levels designed a plan for educational change, the Florida Linkage System (FLS) for Educational Improvement. The Florida Linkage System is a network of people who work together to accomplish the following goals:

> To diagnose problems which impair student performance in the basic skills and other areas.
>
> To link schools with the best available educational programs designed to meet their needs.

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* John A. Emrick and Susan M. Peterson; A Synthesis of Findings Across Five Recent Studies of Educational Dissemination and Change, November,1977, Far West Laboratory for Educational Research and Development, San Francisco, p.8.

To link schools with people who can provide expert technical assistance.

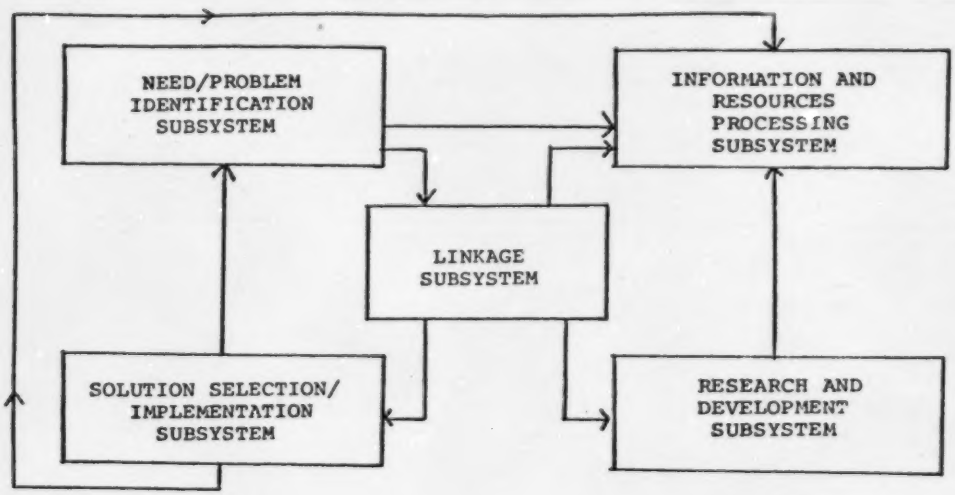
To help schools identify the financial resources required to implement solutions to their problems.

To build the capacity of schools to solve local problems, instructional and other wise.

To assist schools in developing in-service programs tailored to their needs.

The Five Subsystems of the FLS Model are presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1



In designing the FLS process, great care was taken to emphasize the importance of both pre-adoption decision-making, and post-adoption planning and technical assistance. This concern is reflected in the process steps of the model. The FLS process is divided into five (5) interacting subsystems (see Figure 1):

Problem Identification Subsystem: School personnel with the assistance of a trained facilitator and a linker engage in a systematic process of needs assessment and problem identification/verification. With this information they deter-

mine the evaluative criteria for potential solutions and, if needed, request a "solution search". Facilitators are school personnel (the principal, teacher, and where available, curriculum coordinator) who receive training in specialized skills related to the process functions of FLS; facilitators function as a team, in some instances they are called the Instructional Improvement Council.

Linkage Subsystem: Through this subsystem, the school is "linked" with appropriate sources of information and technical assistance. An interface is provided through which the school can easily access the resources needed to solve its problem. Linkers are district TEC, instructional supervision personnel, or College of Education personnel trained as change agents.

Information and Resources Subsystem: This subsystem is a part of the Office of Educational Dissemination/Diffusion in the Florida Department of Education. It provides the information search and retrieval services requested by schools and district staffs, and prepares practitioner oriented responses. This service is accessible through the linkers or by the schools directly.

Research and Development Subsystem: The outcomes of all school initiated solution searches are made available to local, state and federal research and development agencies as input into decision making processes for future resource allocation. Further, as new educational programs and practices are developed and validated by this subsystem, their descriptions are programmed into a "Florida data bank" of the Information and Resource Subsystem.

Solution Selection/Implementation Subsystem: The outcome of a solution search is communicated to the school/client. With the assistance of the facilitator team and linker, the school staff analyzes the appropriateness and viability of the alternative solutions and then selects the one which best meets the criteria established during the problem identification phase.

At this point, the facilitator team and the linker assist school faculties in planning for and installing the selected solution, evaluating the installation process, and assessing the impact of the solution on both the original problem and the general school organization. The results of these formative and summative evaluation activities are documented and fed back to the school decision making authorities, then forwarded into the Information and Resource Subsystem so that it can be accessed by future clients and other interested local, state, or national educators.

For the past two years, two federal grants from the National Institute of Education, HEW, have enabled Florida to field test the Florida Linkage System Model in eighteen Florida school districts, and twenty-eight elementary schools whose primary concern is to improve the teaching of basic skills. Administered by the Office of Educational Dissemination/ Diffusion in the Florida Department of Education, the FLS includes eight TEC's which provide linkage connecting these schools to effective educational products, practices and research findings as well as to expert educators at universities and other institutions. Linkers, housed in the TEC's work with facilitator teams from the twenty-eight participating schools, training faculties in problem solving strategies used to identify instructional problems. Problems are defined in formal "problem statements" and submitted by the linker to the Florida Department of Education for analysis. This unit searches for solutions to the problems and submits the resulting solution strategies to the respective schools for consideration. The facilitator team assisted, if so requested, by experts from the university or the Florida Department of Education, helps the faculty to evaluate the various solutions and to select one or more implementation and evaluation.

Through cyclical application of such problem solving strategies, the school system cannot only address the remediation of basic skills, it can also take a big step toward becoming what Bennis calls an "organic-adaptive" organization.

In their report Emrick and Peterson observe that providing access to information about potential solutions is not sufficient to cause improvement in education. Schools themselves must make the decision about the nature of their problems and about the suitability of products and practices to their needs. As Emrick and Peterson report:

> "Local commitment was invoked by all studies as the single most explanatory variable of outcomes. The components most instrumental in the development of this commitment were personal issues such as interpersonal style and constructs such as 'ownership', 'involvement', 'growth experience', and 'problem solving'." (Emrick and Peterson, p.9)

The quality of the decision making process, "ownership" and involvement" at the school level depends to a great extent upon the skills with which school practitioners approach the identification of problems, analysis of solutions, and implementation of the selected alternatives.

As part of the Florida Linkage System, an in-service training program has been designed and fieldtested which helps practitioners acquire the needed problem solving and planning skills. This program can be tailored to the specific needs of individual school and district staffs. To make the training readily available to school districts through their Teacher Education Centers, two or more professors at each of Florida's nine state universities and in several private institutions have been prepared as trainers. School and district staffs participating in the Florida Linkage System have received training which includes skill development in problem identification, need verification, and solution analysis, in addition to group

process, interpersonal and communication skills. These skills are generic to most problem areas; in fact, many problems may be resolved without requiring external assistance or R & D utilization.

The Director of an exemplary reading program adopted by one of the FLS schools observed that in working with the school staff she "found a group of people who had a real understanding of the methodology of problem solving and who have become a team in the best possible sense of the word. I know it will be possible for us to help create real and permanent change in their school because they have been trained to address their needs in a logical, meaningful manner and are committed to doing so."

Currently the FLS is in its third year of fieldtesting. As part of the overall evaluation of the system, case studies are being prepared on six schools and three TEC's participating in the system. These studies will be available at the end of 1979. However, the success of the FLS approaches is evident in that the participating TEC's are actively carrying the linkages and problem solving approaches to schools outside of the initial project.

As stated in the Plan for the Institutionalization of the Florida Linkage System*, the impact of the Educational Accountability Act of 1976 and subsequent reports of pupil performance on the statewide assessment have been both cause of and occasion for broad inquiry and analysis of school policy. An opportunity has been created for serious consideration of planned changes based on more careful analysis of problems and alternative solutions.

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*A Plan for Institutionalization of the Florida Linkage System, Office of Educational Dissemination/Diffusion, Florida Department of Education, Tallahassee, June 1978.

The professional spirit of teachers is impatient with practices which do not work. Teachers are receptive to new ways of finding and affirming competence in the complex business of teaching. At the same time, however, teacher and school districts compete for scarce resources from an increasingly hostile taxpayer. Florida's urban areas face an especially uncertain future in this regard. It is clear that new ideas will have a much better chance for acceptance if they do no cost more money while offering hope for more efficient utilization of existing resources. The Florida Linkage System allows for a full and equal partnership of professionals with a more equitable and productive distribution of resources, support and trust.